

Mech 1841

Chapter 1841 Better Shield

During the time William Urbesh underwent examinations, Ves and Gloriana turned their attention to other matters.

The day after the experiment, they returned to the design lab in order to design a custom revision of the Aurora Titan.

The variants developed by the two design teams gave Ves a lot of ideas and decent solutions.

Naturally, neither Ves nor Gloriana intended to borrow from them wholesale. The quality of the revision would only drop if they blindly took over the work of Novices and Apprentices.

When the pair settled down in a private design office, they began to plan out their own changes.

"This revision is not meant to renew the Aurora Titan line." Ves explained. "Instead, it's solely meant to upgrade a single copy, the one that my cousin Jannzi Larkinson has adopted."

"Does that mean you intend to fabricate a brand new Aurora Titan?"

Ves shook his head. "No. Jannzi cares a lot about her unique mech and developed a very strong bond with the machine. It's vitally important for her progression that she can maintain her bond with the Shield Of Samar. We can do so by ensuring sufficient continuity between the old version of this mech and the new version of the mech. She has to pilot the 'same' mech, essentially."

Not only did the Shield of Samar accrue some history and forge a bond with its mech pilot, it also carried the Ardent Wish!

Both of them were priceless qualities which couldn't be replaced!

Though Ves set a simple-sounding condition, Gloriana immediately recognized a problem.

"Modifying an existing mech inherently changes its properties. How many alterations can we get away with before the Shield of Samar is no longer the 'same' mech?"

"That's a good question."

He became stumped by this question.

How much could he change while still making sure the Shield of Samar still retained its identity as an Aurora Titan mech?

Ves knew from various modifications done to his mechs that they possessed a decent amount of tolerance towards these kinds of changes.

For example, the LMC was aware that some mech designer once swapped out many of the parts of the Blackbeak and converted it into a rifleman mech.

These changes, though drastic, still retained at least some portion of its X-Factor, thereby retaining its connection to the Black Phoenix, the Blackbeak's long-standing design spirit!

Maintaining the design spirit's connection with the mech was an essential requirement. Without its bond with Qilanxo, the Shield of Samar would never be able to work so well with Jannzi!

This clued Ves into the answer of this complicated question.

"The heart and essence of the Aurora Titan model has to be retained." He guessed.

"What I mean by that is that the character, vision and concept should remain the same. If you think about it, an Aurora Titan is still an Aurora Titan if you strip out its armor system and replace it with something with similar or better properties. However, it's an entirely different story if you replace it with an uncompressed armor system that is vastly inferior."

"The former change retains or improves the defensive character of the Aurora Titan, while the latter change removes that to a large extent." Gloriana followed his logic.

"Correct. As the lead designer of the LMC, I've observed many different files on LMC mechs that have been modified by their owners over the course of their uses. The amount of Desolate Soldiers that have been modified far beyond their factory configuration and specs probably amount to more than 100.000 units!"

This was an incredible amount of modified mechs, enough for the LMC to harvest a huge amount of data and study it through countless angles.

One of the results of these studies was that an LMC mech had a range of tolerance towards modification and alteration. Smaller changes didn't affect its intrinsic character at all, but once they grew more significant, the glows of the mechs started to decrease.

This detrimental change reflected the increasingly smaller relation with the altered mechs and its original design spirit.

Once a mech changed beyond recognition, it no longer bore any direct relation to its original model! It had transformed into an entirely different mech that belonged to its own unique model!

After Ves summarized these observations to Gloriana, his girlfriend slowly nodded in understanding.

"I get it. To put it simply, the upgraded Shield of Samar has to be able to do what the old version of the mech can do. It doesn't matter if its performance drops a little bit! As long as its performance isn't absolutely terrible in an important aspect, it will still retain its original character! However..."

"However...?"

"Some variants are drastically different from the base model, but they're still part of the same product line. Take the Peaceful Soldier for example. It's designed to operate on land as opposed to the Desolate Soldier which is mainly a spaceborn mech. Are they still related to each other?"

"They are." Ves definitely said. "I think this is because of my specialty that I'm able to stretch the Desolate Soldier's identity to this extent in the Peaceful Soldier. If you or any other mech designer developed a variant like the Peaceful Soldier on your own, you would definitely damage its spiritual foundation!"

Though this sounded like a very pedantic issue, in truth it was extremely important for Ves and Gloriana to set these matters straight. Even though they hadn't managed to come up with a solid answer, they at least knew what to watch out for. If they proceeded to modify the Aurora Titan design without becoming aware of the potential pitfalls, then they might ruin the Shield of Samar as a result!

Fortunately, Ves possessed more than enough confidence in his ability and restraint.

"Let's look at the two variants." He gestured towards the projected works of the two design teams.

"The first variant developed by the Tovar Design Team opted to broaden the Aurora Titan's scope, while the second variant designed by the Ylvaine Design Team went for the opposite approach."

"The first design team didn't bother asking what Jannzi wanted to see in an upgraded version of her mech." She noted. "It's a pity. Their work is quite comprehensive. Their variant has actually succeeded in adding landbound capabilities to the Aurora Titan."

"It wouldn't be the Aurora Titan as we know it, though." Ves spoke. "Such a drastic change alters the fundamental character of the Aurora Titan. While I can still work with that, it's not something Jannzi particularly desires. She should be focusing her utmost

on breaking through to expert pilot, and that means she needs to push herself and her mech to the limits and beyond."

This meant that the mech had to complement Jannzi existing strengths and priorities. The second variant was much more in line with her intentions.

Ves didn't make the mistake the first design team made. He already approached Jannzi in private and recorded her preferences.

Overall, Jannzi didn't have a very large wish list. The single most demand she posed was that the defense of the Shield of Samar should be as high as possible!

As long as the Shield of Samar could take an enormous beating, Jannzi would have nothing to complain about! It didn't matter if the mech was still garbage in terms on offense and mobility. To her, the entire point of the Aurora Titan model was to provide absolute defense!

"The second variant is therefore much more in line with Jannzi's demands." Gloriana concluded. She amplified the projection and studied its internal structure in greater detail. "It's a decent starting point, all considered."

"Don't discount the first variant. It contains some adaptations that are also helpful, especially when it comes to the supplemental components."

Both variants improved upon the base model by replacing some of the stock lastgen components with new generation equivalents released within the last half year.

Updating outdated components with newer versions was one of the simplest and most straightforward ways of improving a mech design.

Naturally, both Ves and Gloriana did not want to miss out on this advantage. However, there was more to an upgrade than just putting in better parts.

"It's been years since you've designed the original Aurora Titan with Professor Ventag." Gloriana noted.

"True. I've improved since then, but that doesn't mean the base model is flawed. Collaborating with a Senior has done much to improve its overall quality. There aren't many design choices I need to revisit even if I'm older and better now. The only opportunities to introduce meaningful changes will come when we replace the original components with newer ones."

After forming a general direction, they drafted some suggested changes in their own revision. They referenced the two variants and browsed the MTA's enormous library of component licenses for interesting goodies.

It didn't take long for them to form a draft that bore some resemblance to the second variant.

Just like the second design team, the pair opted to deepen the core strengths of the Aurora Titan model.

Of course, their version had much more promise. Not only did Ves and Gloriana expect to make significant improvements to the integrity of the mech, they also made much better use out of the armor system based on Breyer alloy.

In fact, now that Gloriana started working on the Aurora Titan, she wanted to make even more changes!

Ves blocked her from doing so, though. "I know you can't resist the urge to implement some fixes, but we don't have the time to need to go that far. This is supposed to be a minor revision, not a major revision. I'll let you have free reign when it's time for me to design the Aurora Titan Mark II."

Though Gloriana looked disappointed, she gave in to his demand. "Fine. I expect to make my mark on the next iteration of this line. Professor Ventag may have made a lot of contributions to the original design, but he's no longer necessary now that you have me! Unlike him, I can help you upgrade its class so that it can fully participate in battles between second-class mechs!"

She was right in that, though Ves felt there was more than a bit of selfishness in her request. The Aurora Titan, despite its impractical nature and its modest success, was one of his favorite mech designs. He considered it a step above the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord mainly because it was his first design with an A-graded X-Factor!

Due to all of the sentiment he formed for this mech design, Ves planned and drafted the upgraded version of the Shield of Samar with a lot more care and affection than normal.

Both Qilano and Jannzi Larkinson's fortunes were tied to this design! Ves had a responsibility to do right by them and make Jannzi's personal mech as fitting as possible given the limitations at play.

Soon enough, the pair finished their draft and settled all of the significant design choices. Compared to the base model, the upgraded variant possessed so much defense that it performed no worse than the Paravin in this aspect!

Did Jannzi need this much defense? Probably not. It made the upgraded mech very awesome though, and it fully conformed to the Aurora Titan's character!

As a super-medium space knight, the mech vastly overperformed in all of the specs that mattered in terms of defense! Not a single third-class mech could match its ridiculous ability to resist damage!

Of course, this did not come without a cost. Aside from all of the new generation licenses the LMC had to pay out of its cash reserves, Ves also had to supply at least a container's worth of Breyer alloy!

How fast could his 'production loop' spit out the necessary amount of Breyer alloy?

This might take some time, especially since the Shield of Samar took its defensive role to an even greater extreme!

"Well, let's design this as fast as possible so we can move on to our next project." He said.

He really wanted to start the Larkinson mech design project as quickly as possible!

Chapter 1842 The New William

Developing a modification plan for the Aurora Titan plan did not take as much time as he thought. Ves and Gloriana both borrowed substantially from the two variants developed by the design teams and refined the solutions from there. This saved them a considerable amount of time and allowed them to skip entire steps.

Another reason the redesign sped up was because Ves mainly aimed for easy gains and convenient modifications. The Shield of Samar needed to be upgraded quickly, so Ves tried to refrain from going overboard on the design and material aspects.

Replacing the power reactor with a vastly-upgraded one increased the mech's endurance and mobility, though not by a fantastic margin. What was much more interesting was that the Shield of Samar would get a lot more use out of its polarizing module, though its relative importance had dropped due to the mech's vastly-upgraded armor system.

Ves tried to be as smart as possible in applying Breyer alloy to the mech. Though he really wanted to replace every major support structure with superior alloys and metallic exotics, the Scarlet Rose only accumulated a certain amount of Breyer alloy so far. The production loop had already been sped up to the limit!

Therefore, Ves only applied the Breyer alloy to the armor system, critical internal support structures and the cockpit.

He paid extra attention to the latter. Though he didn't think that Jannzi would ever lose the Shield of Samar, Ves wanted to be sure that she would be able to survive the attack that managed to fell her insanely resilient mech!

Naturally, the mech retained its character as a pure spaceborn mech. While there was no fundamental objection to adding landbound capabilities to the Shield of Samar, it was best for Jannzi to focus on excelling in one mode of battle. This was one of the

nuggets of wisdom that the Larkinson Family generated after studying the factors increased the chances of promotion for their mech pilots.

The extraordinary were regarded this way due to their insanely good performance which reached superhuman levels in some aspects. How could a mech pilot ever expect to become exceptional if they bit off more than they could chew and spread their training across too many areas?

That said, it wasn't impossible for a mech pilot who dabbled in everything to advance to expert pilot. Many second-rate and first-rate mech pilots managed to do so with ease. It was just that their climb was at least twice or thrice as hard as if they focused on delving a single specialty.

To be honest, designing the upgrades for the Shield of Samar was so effortless to Ves that he spent more thinking power on updating its aesthetics!

The current appearance of the mech still reflected its former allegiance to the 7th Apocalypse Heralds of the Mech Corps. Aside from hastily painting over its regimental markings and other military badges, the mech still bore the red-black-brown camouflage pattern of its former mech regiment!

"This has to go." He stated.

Just like any other exceptional mech pilot, Jannzi transferred to the Avatars of Myth, so Ves applied the distinctive golden coating to the minor revision.

The default color scheme of the Avatars looked very attention-grabbing with their reflective golden coating interspersed with black elements and navy blue accents.

For some reason, Ves found this plain color scheme to be rather gauche. He wanted to add a spark of originality to the Shield of Samar's appearance so that it looked a bit special than the other Aurora Titans assigned to the Avatars.

"You could break up the monotony with a pattern." Gloriana suggested. "The Apocalypse Heralds did just that. Maybe we can go for something more sophisticated than a generic camouflage pattern."

"Ah, good idea!"

Appearances mattered. The image a mech conveyed could make or break a battle. That was what Ves believed.

He applied gold and black on the Shield of Samar in uniform, diagonal strips. This had the very interesting effect of disguising some of the exterior contours of the mech, thereby making it harder to distinguish key components or vulnerabilities!

In order to break up the monotony of the pattern, Ves applied navy blue coating on specific external components.

Overall, the mech still looked impressive and premium, but in an entirely different fashion now! It stood out from all of the other Avatar mechs, which was exactly what Ves intended!

For the tower shield, Ves decided to go apply the same colors in a diamond pattern. This caused it to stand out more and hopefully attract more enemy fire.

"We can't forget about the markings."

The Avatars had already settled on a distinctive style which Ves fully agreed with. He applied the emblems of the Larkinson Clan and the Avatars of Myth onto the upper right chest. He also added a larger version of the clan emblem to the front surface of the tower shield.

The emblem of the Larkinson Clan consisted of a stylized golden cat head. So far, the emblem hadn't been spread around too much. The Shield of Samar would be the first mech to bear this symbol with pride!

The Avatars of Myth adopted their own emblem some time ago. Ves recalled Commander Melkor submitting his proposal for approval. The emblem which he settled on consisted of a Vitruvian mech, which looked fairly strange but also deep.

With both of these markings adorning the Shield of Samar, its allegiance became undeniable.

As final visual touch, Ves and Gloriana both added their signature looks to the forehead of the Shield of Samar. The glowing third eye surrounded by the crystal hexagon conveyed a mystical quality to the mech, which added yet another dimension to the custom mech's distinctiveness!

Due to the Shield of Samar's extreme importance, Ves whimsically decided to splurge on the third eye. He ordered a high-quality crystal from the Ylvaine Protectorate that cost as much as a premium mech in order to make sure it was strong enough to resist a huge amount of damage!

Not only that, he upgraded the lighting mechanism that allowed the third eye to glow at varying intensities according to the alignment between the mech pilot and the design spirit of the mech.

Jannzi's bond with Qilanxo was so powerful that the third eye couldn't glow bright enough to reflect this strength! Ves therefore amplified the upper range of the third eye's glow until it resembled a beacon in the dark!

As Ves continued to add miscellaneous little flourishes to the Shield of Samar's upgraded design, Gloriana continued to look on with a look of amusement.

"You really enjoy this, do you?"

Throughout this entire design session, Ves constantly had a smile on his face! He had to admit that he truly did get caught up in redesigning the visuals of the Shield of Samar.

"I've been swamped with work lately." He told her. "I'm also shouldering a lot of responsibilities. I've just founded the Larkinson Clan and already the Larkinson Family is sending more relatives to us due to recent developments. Both the sandmen and the Fridaymen are constantly looming over my head. I'm under a lot of time pressure as well. It's rare for me to find a moment of pure enjoyment in my days."

"Isn't designing mechs enough?"

"It's more than sufficient to carry me through to the day. Don't misunderstand me. It's just that mech design is mostly work, while visual design is largely an expression of art. They're different to me. It's not necessary for me to invest so much effort in the latter, but I've decided to do so anyway because I enjoy it. I guess you can call it my hobby."

"You should consider building figurines of mechs." Gloriana suggested. "I know some mech designers dabble in it as a means to relax and to sober their minds."

"I've considered this option multiple times. I'm not sure I have the time to spare on such frivolities. Working on actual mech designs is far more interesting than working on miniature fakes."

Her questioning did prompt Ves to rein himself in and finalize the project. Once they completed the revision, they passed it onto the design teams and tasked them with subjecting the new design to various stress tests in order to determine its theoretical performance.

Once the revised design didn't show any obvious flaws, Ves wanted to upgrade the Shield of Samar right away. He had no idea what the latest movements of the sandmen hinted at, but Ves faintly had a feeling that the climax of the Sand War might be getting closer!

Finishing the minor revision to the Shield of Samar came just in time to Ves. After a couple of days, William Urbesh should have undergone a thorough examination. Both his mental and physical state were highly important to his future as a mech pilot!

They visited a temporary treatment center set up by the Ves Larkinson Foundation for Wounded Veterans and met with Ranya and Lupo.

"So what are the results?" Gloriana asked her cousin.

"Mr. Urbesh is..physically healthy." Ranya Wodin hesitantly answered. "Aside from some strange abnormalities concerning his central nervous system, he is as healthy and strong as any second-class mech pilot. His augmentations are all working fine."

"What's the problem then?" Ves asked.

Ranya briefly directed an unreadable expression towards Ves before turning back to her cousin. "The main issues we have with William are related to his abnormal mental state. Compared to the files we have on him before he participated in the Sand War, he was by all accounts normal, if a bit quick to fright."

"He was a coward." Ves bluntly stated.

"Yes.. Well, somehow, he experienced multiple personality changes over the course of his stay with the Larkinsons. I contacted Commander Melkor Larkinson to hear what he thought about Mr. Urbesh. Evidently, another shift has occurred because Silent William has become much more reticent to communicate than before. In the past, he was at least willing to communicate nonverbally or make his opinions clear through his actions. Now, he just sits or lays on his bed while ignoring virtually every attempt to communicate."

Ves grimaced while Gloriana looked at him with a doubting expression.

Had he botched the correctional surgery? Did he go overboard with amplifying the silent part of William's personality?

"Tell me something else. Is there anything about him that is better?"

"He's an expert candidate now!" Dr. Lupo shouted, interrupted the Hexer exobiologist. "It's fascinating to examine an expert candidate in the flesh! We've detected all kinds of interesting brain activity! It's unfortunate that none of us specialize in neurology, but the data we've gathered is doubtlessly interesting!"

Ves' eyes lit up. He was already confident that William had reached the standard of an expert candidate, but it was nice to hear independent confirmation from another source.

"How strong is his resonance strength?"

"Has his brain activity increased or decreased in the last few days?"

"Has he shown any desire to pilot a mech?"

As Ves rapidly peppered Dr. Lupo with a number of questions, both Ranya and Gloriana shared a deep look with each other. The latter nodded her head minutely before shaking her head a moment later.

Their silent communication only lasted for a short moment before they turned their attention to the conversation held by the boys.

Once Ves gained a better sense of Silent William's state, he moved to recovery room and faced him in person.

The Urbesh clansman looked at Ves in silence. The mech pilot's eyes reflected very little emotion as Ves examined him both visually and spiritually.

Though it was a bit unnerving to face an eerily silent mech pilot, Ves actually found William to be a bit more pleasant than before.

The old influence from Nyxie had disappeared. The William that underwent the latest corrective surgery may have inherited William Urbesh's memories, but his personality and consciousness was completely detached from his former self!

To all intents and purposes, the William of the past had died! A new William had taken his place, one who didn't carry the baggage of the past!

After confirming this shift, Ves grinned and stepped forward to extend his hand. "Welcome to your new life, Mr. Urbesh. I hope you can live up to your potential and bring your clan back to power."

Everyone else looked surprised when William responded to Ves by shaking his hand!

Chapter 1843 Intended Result

It should have been unnerving to see the new William. His old personality and consciousness had died the moment Ves shattered his spiritual potential.

Ves truly killed him at that time. The fact that he managed to bring William's spirit back to life did not discount the reality that the old William was gone!

Neither his original existence nor the contamination from Nyxie survived the transition intact. Instead, they had been broken up into shards and merged back into an entirely new whole along with some other ingredients.

The result was a new entity that resembled William Urbesh but actually bore only a partial relation to his old self!

Yet it was exactly because of this new start that Ves became reassured by how William ended up. While he may behave taciturn and anti-social in the presence of others, that was actually something good.

Ves designed many aspects about William's new personality! To see them come to fruition proved that it was actually possible to program a living entity through spirituality!

Not only that, but Ves could also employ his rudimentary understanding of spiritual engineering to induce someone with spiritual potential to develop a force of will!

This news alone was enough to upend the entire galaxy!

The implications were staggering, and so were the ethical concerns!

Though he was immensely pleased that he finally managed to turn William into an expert candidate, the price the beneficiary paid was significant.

A lot of mech pilots yearned to become expert pilots. Some would even be willing to kill their entire families just to experience apotheosis!

Yet even the most selfish bastard would never contemplate killing themselves in order to reach this strength!

Even if they had the chance to become famous and renowned throughout the star sector after gaining this strength, they wouldn't be alive to enjoy their success!

This was because other entities steered their bodies!

With such a hefty price, Ves would never allow his own people to undergo this process!

"It's a pity." He sighed.

"Meow." Lucky morosely replied right afterwards as he hung on his shoulder like a piece of laundry.

Ves, Gloriana and their cats currently visited a training ground the Larkinson Clan leased from the local government of Kesseling VIII. They moved to a well-fortified underground control center which projected and displayed numerous live training sessions. Both the Avatars and Sentinels spent a decent amount of time at this training ground.

To confirm whether Silent William still retained his ability to pilot mechs, Ves assigned him a spare Crystal Lord. Though its X-Factor and design quality was no match for his most recent works, that also allowed Ves to obtain results that weren't tainted by the abnormal properties of his more exaggerated mechs!

The original William Urbesh specialized in piloting axeman mechs. He branched out to piloting the Resentful Soldier due to the Sand War, but not a lot of time had passed for him to gain true mastery in this domain.

By all accounts, Silent William's ranged combat skills should have been mediocre. A couple of months of intensive battle may have stimulated him to improve quickly, but he

shouldn't have been a match to someone who truly specialized in marksmanship such as Melkor!

It therefore came as a shock that the results from the current training session completely reversed the rankings. Silent William's Crystal Lord weaved through various obstacles and mounds of dirt while skillfully shooting down target drone after target drone with pinpoint accuracy!

The mech had seemingly come alive under his control. Not only did the premium laser rifleman mech maintain optimal speed throughout its run, the machine also became a conduit for Silent William's lethal attacks!

The mock battles against the flying target drones showed that the mech pilot improved massively in terms of marksmanship.

However, it was his battle against a projected target mech that proved his expert candidate chops!

The dogfight that ensued between the Crystal Lord and a substantially more superior simulated opponent quickly turned into stomp!

Silent William's Crystal Lord always managed to weave and move around enemy shots by taking maximum advantage of its agility and range motion.

The rifle in the Crystal Lord's hands continually spat out laser beams that always hit the same set of spots with hardly any deviations! The Crystal Lord quickly dismantled the projected mech with surgical precision with hardly any drop in efficiency!

"I'm very satisfied." Ves smiled. "It seems like William has not only managed to retain his piloting skill, but managed to improve far beyond the level I expected!"

He kept an eye towards Silent William's force of will throughout the entire practice session! The power-hungry force of will had been infused with a substantial amount of spiritual energy, empowering it beyond the standard of ordinary expert candidates!

The headstart provided by Ves and Cassandra Breyer had immediately propelled Silent William to the upper end of expert candidates! In fact, William might be enjoying some other boons that Ves wasn't aware of. It was difficult to know for sure considering how little Ves actually understood what he had done.

The only concern that could mar his joy was whatever Cassandra Breyer managed to do. The spiritual product that came to inhabit William's mind and body had been contaminated by her mummified touch.

Though her influence was relatively minor compared to his own, Ves was still a bit wary about the consequences.

"Well, it's not like I'll be hosting him much longer." He muttered. "Soon, he's not my problem anymore."

"Meow."

Once William finished his practice session, Ves made sure to send him back before making arrangements for his pickup.

Due to the current state of the star sector, it was highly unwise to escort him back to the Centerpoint System!

The sector headquarters of the MTA was situated in the middle of the border between the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony!

Though neither side dared to interfere with traffic to and from this pivotal star system, this only guaranteed the safety of ships affiliated with the MTA and vessels belonging to enormous trans-sector shipping companies!

Fortunately, after a quick inquiry, Ves found out that he didn't have to be responsible for sending William back to Centerpoint. He only had to drop his charge off the closest MTA branch office or outpost.

Kesseling VIII happened to be a moderate industrial planet, so it hosted its own MTA branch in order to regulate the local mech industry.

Ves therefore assigned the Battle Criers to take Silent William and escort him to the doorstep of the MTA branch.

Once William crossed into the premises, Ves was no longer responsible for his life!

After Ves issued the orders, he found out that it would take some time for William to transfer to the nearest Rim Guardian presence. Only until the fraternity confirmed that William was truly him and not some impostor or clone would Ves be finished with this affair!

Ves wasn't worried that the Rim Guardians would declare William to be a fake. Even if his entire psyche and personality changed enormously, there was still enough of him left to carry forth his identity!

At least Ves hoped so. He needed to prepare a good story if the Rim Guardians started asking some uncomfortable questions.

"You look glad, Ves. Are you so eager to see William go?" Gloriana prodded him the next day at the design lab.

"It's a relief. This was an impossible mission for anyone. I don't really know why the Rim Guardians came up with this demand in the first place. I think they'll be quite surprised when they see a hopeless case return stronger than they had ever conceived!"

He wasn't worried that the Rim Guardians suspected that Ves mastered some secret technique that could turn mech pilots into expert pilots. This was such an outlandish idea that it shouldn't even be on their minds!

It was already quite clear that Ves forced Silent William to participate in the Sand War. By defending the Bright Republic against the sandman onslaught over many battles, the amount of pressure exerted on him was enormous!

Every mech pilot that fought so many harrowing battles against the sandmen came out different. Melkor matured a lot and grew into his role as the Avatar Commander. Many other mech pilots shed their innocence. Why shouldn't William be any different?

Granted, his personality shift was the most extreme that Ves had ever seen, but it should still be believable, right?

"Hopefully they'll focus more on the results rather than the process." He whispered.

In any case, Ves believed he would soon be able to access the guest portal of the Rim Guardians. There, he could purchase exclusive goods and services, get in touch with other mech designers who proved themselves, accept various missions and encounter other opportunities!

With the support of the Rim Guardians, Ves could finally expand his reach outside the Komodo Star Sector!

It finally became possible for him to extend his influence to Vicious Mountain and Majestic Teal!

Of course, all of that came at a price. The Rim Guardians definitely did not provide these kinds of benefits for free.

With William out of the way, Ves devoted his full attention to his design projects.

He soon turned to upgrading the Shield of Samar. The minor revision passed all of the simulated tests, just as he predicted.

He decided to take this job seriously and brought Gloriana and both of his design teams to a workshop. The Shield of Samar was already locked in place, ready to be disassembled.

Jannzi was present as well. Since the Shield of Samar was her most possession, she couldn't bear to be absent when her mech was being worked upon! She wanted to witness every change with her own eyes!

"How long will this take?"

"Three to five days." Ves estimated. "We'll be careful with your mech. Don't worry. It's in good hands."

He wanted to work on the mech in person this time to ensure that nothing was botched. He brought his designs teams to the workshop in order to provide them with some hands-on experience in mechs.

He soon found out that many of his mech designers never fabricated a mech outside of their mandatory classes back when they were studying mech design!

Ves palmed his face when he saw how clueless his subordinates acted. Compared to seasoned mech technicians, people like Cherie Tovar and Mayer Torto acted like babies!

Fortunately, at least some of his subordinate mech designers knew the right end of a multitool. The two team leaders showed why they deserved their positions. Miles Tovar and Oscar DiMartin soon directed their team members and showed them how to perform their tasks.

One mech designer that particularly impressed him was Merrill Truman! The former pirate designer that Ves added to his employ on a whim turned out to be a veritable grease monkey!

She knew her way around with tools and possessed a very good sense on the most optimal way to fabricate a part or assemble it into place!

"I spent more time repairing mechs than anything else in the frontier." She explained. "The mech market there isn't very active. Pirates are much more eager to restore their broken mechs rather than spend their precious K-coins on buying new ones!"

That made sense to Ves. "I see. You had to become very good at making the most out of suboptimal conditions."

She smiled grimly at him. "Sometimes, my mech workshop for the day was literally a junkyard. Try restoring a mech under those conditions. I had to build my own rudimentary assembly system in order to build a mech out of a collection of parts!"

Her circumstances in the frontier were much worse than Ves had ever experienced! While he had access to a considerable amount of supplies and infrastructure from the

Flagrant Vandals, Merrill could only work with whatever the depraved pirates could supply!

Perhaps Ves should pay more attention to Merrill.

Chapter 1844 What Pirate?

Discovering that Merrill Truman was right at home in a mech workshop came as a pleasant surprise to Ves. He had become incredibly disappointed at the lack of hands-on fluency in his other subordinates.

While he didn't insist that every mech designer should have the same competences at him, he still thought it was an awful idea for someone of his profession to neglect this side of the job!

How could mech designers possibly know what they were dealing with when they never put a mech together piece by piece?

How could mech designers expertly model and anticipate the performance of mechs if they never came close to a component weighing several tons?

How could mech designers possibly claim to understand mechs when they never saw the consequences of battle in person?

All of these questions and more weighed on his mind as he considered the shortcoming in the development of most of his mech designers. Even the more experienced among them such as the team leaders weren't entirely comfortable with working in a mech workshop.

"Manual work is demeaning." Miles Tovar spoke frankly to Ves. "While it is necessary for us to know the basics of what is happening in a mech workshop of a manufacturing hall, it is better to leave the heavy lifting to the mech technicians!"

Ves wanted to summon the Amastendira, press its muzzle right against his temple and pull the trigger!

He almost couldn't believe what Miles was saying! Was he such a highborn elitist snob that he completely ignored the benefits of gaining practical experience in working with mechs?!

"I'm not asking you to be as proficient in tools and speckled with grease stains as an actual mech technician." He said. "I just expect you all to know what you are doing! You don't have to be as good in the workshop as Merrill here, but at least you should be capable of putting together a mech during an emergency!"

None of the Tovars looked very enthusiastic about that idea. "We didn't learn that in school."

"NOT EVERYTHING YOU LEARN IN SCHOOL IS CORRECT!" Ves shouted.
"DIFFERENT TEACHERS HAVE DIFFERENT IDEAS! DIFFERENT CURRICULUMS EMPHASIZE DIFFERENT ASPECTS!"

Gloriana placed her hand on his shoulder in order to calm him down. "I think he's right. At Kelma University, one of the best mech design schools in the Hegemony, I learned how to build a mech on my own. My professors and instructors didn't insist on these classes because they believed we needed to be humbled. They wanted their students to understand on a deeper level what they were actually designing! When your only experience with mechs is working on them in a design interface, then there is a serious disconnect between your theoretical understanding and reality!"

"Well said." Ves nodded in thanks at her explanation. "You heard it. Since a second-class mech designer like Gloriana has to learn how to work in a workshop, then so should the rest of you! Don't complain! This is for your own good!"

Though some of them complained anyway, Ves would have none of it. Aside from the three who proved their chops, the other eight were too inept! None of them could operate a 3D printer worth a damn and their tools might as well be training weights in their hands!

He quickly had enough.

"STOP! It's irresponsible for me to allow you to work on Jannzi's mechs. The eight of you should go! I'll arrange some training sessions for you at one of the local mech manufacturing plants. Each of you need to shore up your fabrication and assembly skills as quickly as possible!"

It took some time to set up these improvised sessions and cart the inexperienced mech designers to another site.

People like Mayer Torto who were just starting their careers would definitely be able to catch on quickly. The benefits of acquiring and improving this set of skills would definitely boost his competence!

As for the older ones who long avoided mech manufacturing sites like the plague, they still weren't convinced of the merits of acquiring hands-on expertise and experience.

"It's a bit unfortunate that this school of thought is still going strong." He lamented to Gloriana. "I hate the claim that mech designers only belong in a design lab!"

Gloriana shrugged. "You're preaching to the choir here, Ves. I fully agree with you. I would never have never come up with my current design philosophy if mechs are just

wireframe models and lists of specifications to me. That said, there is some merit to this school of thought. Mech designers are separate from mech technicians. This idea is particularly prevalent in the more prosperous parts of human space."

That didn't change his opinion. "What those first-rate mech designers do is their business. In my company and workplace, my rules are in place. And one of them is that each mech designer in my design team better know their way around a mech workshop!"

Once he settled this issue, they resumed upgrading the Shield of Samar.

Since the mech was very big, this took a lot of time. A lot of components had to be checked, repaired or replaced as years of use wore some of them down. Though it was no problem for them to continue operating for at least five years or more, Ves did not wish to leave anything to chance.

Anything that maximized Jannzi's chances of survival should be approved! Even if it was horribly wasteful to throw out components that could easily last for decades, Ves didn't care!

Perhaps every mech repair shop in existence would look at Ves in horror, but most of his mind was not on preventative maintenance.

Instead, he awaited the shipment of Breyer alloy with great anticipation. When the Battle Criers finally transferred a tightly-guarded container filled with bars of expensive exotics, Ves practically dove into them right away!

Though Gloriana already knew that Ves intended to apply Breyer alloy to his mechs due to working on the revision, she still found the shipment to be perplexing.

"Where are you getting all of this Breyer alloy, Ves? Materials like these can't be found in the Komodo Star Sector!"

"My Battle Criers recently came into contact with a powerful black market organization during their previous excursion."

"Oh." She curled her mouth in distance. "I see. I hope they didn't overcharge you. I can't stand their ilk!"

His pre-prepared excuse succeeded in passing muster, at least for now. While it was strange to encounter a random stash of Breyer alloy in this part of space, the material mattered a lot to Ves and Jannzi. They both wanted the Shield of Samar to be the most impervious rock imaginable!

One unexpected benefit was that Gloriana really didn't like underground society. Anything related to pirates, dark mercenaries, smugglers, slave traders and other

unsavory types repelled her to no end! They were disgusting degenerates in her eyes, and she wanted nothing to do with these lowlives!

Ves was different.

The irregular part of society existed everywhere. It provided conveniences to those who weren't able to obtain what they wanted the regular way.

While there was indeed a lot of merit in Gloriana's stance, that was because she had never been desperate enough to rely on the underground economy.

She even thought that Ves should stop associating with underground organizations!

"Whatever you need, you can ask me before you go run off to pirates!" She insisted with her arms placed on her hips. "A mech designer of your caliber shouldn't be involved in this sphere anymore!"

Ves shook his head. "I know what I'm doing, Gloriana. These connections are very necessary. Unlike you who can run off to your mother or your Wodin Dynasty every time you want something, I had to rely on myself in my early years! There is way more to human civilization than what is in the light."

"You.. you're so insufferable!"

Though Gloriana continued to disagree with him, they eventually dropped the topic. This was yet another matter where they simply agreed to disagree.

As long as Ves kept his black market interactions away from Gloriana, she wouldn't have a reason to fuss about what he was doing.

In this way, he reluctantly managed to explain the source of all of the Breyer alloy he 'bought' from an unnamed black market organization.

They soon resumed their work. Since the Shield of Samar consisted mainly of armor, it took a lot of time to process the new materials.

Breyer alloy and its constituent materials were incredibly potent or resilient. This made them very hard to work with compared to other materials.

Fortunately, the workshop they were working from had already been outfitted with all of the high-quality fabrication equipment that originally belonged to Gloriana's Stellar Chaser.

With all of the machines available, Ves and Gloriana slowly shaped the Breyer alloy into armor plates shaped to match the contours of the Shield of Samar.

The three subordinate mech designers proceeded to examine the fabricated plates extensively to make sure they were up to par. Once they determined that the component met the standard, they proceeded to assemble it in place.

Ves found out that neither he nor Gloriana needed to pay too much attention to the assembly work. Merrill turned out to be so skilled, precise and thorough that she managed to earn both of their trust!

In fact, Ves found it strange that Gloriana approved of Merrill so quickly even though the latter used to be a pirate designer!

"Don't you know she used to muck about in the frontier?" He asked.

"It doesn't matter." Gloriana said as she adjusted some controls on the console of a production machine. "Miss Truman is a woman."

"What? That's it?"

He looked completely confused!

"If you don't understand my point, then don't bother asking!"

"Miaow!"

Clixie echoed her owner's opinion!

Lack of understanding aside, Ves was glad that Gloriana didn't find fault with Merrill. He was worried that his decision to add a former pirate designer to his crew would lead to a lot of controversy, but Merrill was so well-behaved and normal that hardly anything about her screamed pirate!

Work proceeded without any further interruption. Over the course of four, lengthy days, the Shield of Samar began to regain its life. The stripped-down Shield of Samar slowly started to regain its 'skin' as more and more greyish armor plating covered up its exposed insides.

All the while, Jannzi observed the work being done to her mech with rapt attention. She only left in order to sleep or do her daily necessities. Other than that, she tried to witness as much as possible.

"You don't have to be present here." He told her one day. "You hardly understand the technical side of mechs. You aren't gaining anything from observing the refit operation."

Jannzi Larkinson shrugged. "I still want to be here. This is my mech."

The bond she built up with her mech transcended far beyond the typical affection that mech pilots held for their machines!

Ves did not quibble any further once he realized that Jannzi was absolutely serious about her decision.

This was a matter of dedication to her! The Shield of Samar was an indispensable part of her life, and she couldn't bear to be away from it for too long!

Ves was reminded of the old tales and legends where ancient swordsmen spent so much time with their weapons that they even brought them to bed!

Even in the Age of Mechs, there were stories abound of superstitious people hugging their assault rifles in their sleep like they were stuffed animals.

While it was easy to laugh at them and ridicule their behavior, Ves did not think they were doing something useless.

To him, these dedicated soldiers and warriors were forging an emotional bond with their weapons! And this bond was not something fake, but a real spiritual phenomenon that could definitely make a difference as long as it was formed!

The dedication that Jannzi held for her Shield of Samar and by extension its design spirit was probably the strongest that Ves had ever seen. Jannzi did not take her current connection to Qilanxo for granted, but always tried her best to deepen it and bring it to the next level!

Chapter 1845 Trus

"The star sector is becoming more and more turbulent." Calabast spoke as she draped her body over the couch. The two central wars that have been raging on have proven to be disasters to most people, but some see opportunity in them. Many actors are on the move. Grudges are being settled and greed is driving the patient into action."

"That all sounds nice, but what does that have to do with me? I'm not interested in participating in these power games."

His strategic partner looked at him like he was an idiot. "Anyone who catches the notice of the powerful is automatically involved. With all of the accomplishments you've made and all of the stunts you've pulled off, you entered the radar of many powerful people and organizations. You asked me what I've been doing recently. Do you know I've been busy with beefing up our counterintelligence operations? The amount of spies and informers that have sought to keep tabs on you has increased by over seven times!"

Ves grimaced as he leaned back against his office chair while petting his cat.

"Meow!" Lucky was rolling restlessly on his lap.

"What are these people after?"

"You're a smart boy, Ves. You can figure it out. Suffice to say, it's hard to operate spies in the Ylvaine Protectorate. Foreigners can almost never fit in and the native Ylvainans practically worship the ground you are walking on. That said, it's not impossible to succeed."

"So do I need to be more careful or something?"

"There aren't any imminent threats now as far as I'm aware. I'm just telling you to exercise caution and be ready to react to various possible emergencies. Despite the peace reigning in the Ylvaine Protectorate and the strange withdrawal of the sandmen, our star sector is anything but stable."

Ves offered her a confident smile. "After the incident on Cloudy Curtain, the Executive Council and I have thoroughly expanded and updated our contingency plans. I've avoided committing too much to any state or organization, including the Ylvaine Protectorate."

"It sounds like you are steadily drawing down your commitments to the Komodo Star Sector. Reducing the headcount of the LMC and encouraging the Larkinson Clan to go spaceborn are all meant to make you more mobile."

"It's never too early to prepare for my upcoming grand expedition. Transitioning from living in a state to living on a starship for years on end is very difficult from what I've learned. The nine years I have left is not enough to facilitate a complete transition!"

Calabast crossed her arms. Her red lips curled into a frown. "There's more to it. To me, it doesn't seem like you plan to stick around in this star sector for long. I read your browser history. You've been reading up on Vicious Mountain lately. Are you trying to run from the Hegemony, or Gloriana's mother?"

"I was just looking into the possibility of expanding the LMC into Vicious Mountain!" Ves raised his hands in innocence. "Now that I've completed the Rim Guardian Fraternity's initiation mission, I can hopefully access their extensive trade network. With how turbulent our star sector's mech market is these days, it seems prudent for me to start looking elsewhere for business opportunities. It just so happens that Silent William can serve as a liaison for us in the Garlen Empire!"

"Ah, yes. Mr. William Urbesh. Interesting fellow. His personality completely changed during the time he was under your care." She chuckled. "Perhaps it's wrong for me to use the word 'care'."

"Hey! He's an expert candidate, at least! What's a little trauma compared to the opportunity to transcend your mortal limits?"

"William incurred more than 'a little' trauma in my books. You should be careful of the reaction from the Rim Guardians. You may have completed the letter of their request, but the spirit..."

"His spirit has never been better! He used to be a complete waste of space and a disgrace to the Urbesh Clan! If he continued to remain as useless as he was before, his clan would have certainly fallen due to a lack of qualified successor! At least I managed to make him strong to the point where he can single-handedly lead his clan back to prominence in the Slicer Tribe!"

Her long legs dangled in the air as she reluctantly nodded. "Your efforts benefit the Urbesh Clan. I'll give you that. From my analysis, the Rim Guardians have a stake in the clan. They're not completely indifferent to the local factions of the star sectors they govern over. While the MTA ordinarily likes to pretend they are neutral and indifferent to the affairs of those they govern, the truth is a lot murkier. Some states, organizations and factions enjoy the secret of the MTA or certain factions or individuals within it. Be careful in participating in their schemes."

As she talked, Lucky seemed to have enough of Ves. He jumped from his owner's lap and floated over to rest against Calabast's chest.

The woman grinned and started pampering Lucky with intensive ministrations with her slender fingers!

The cat was loving it! His eyes squinted and his tail flitted around like he was an excited dog!

"Meow~"

Ves ignored the display in front of him. No matter how petulant Lucky behaved, he always went back! Other people may hold his attention, but only Ves was his master!

Well, there was his mother as well, but that didn't count.

He turned his attention back to the conversation. There had to be more behind Calabast's visit than provide him with a vague warning.

"Does that mean the Komodo War has their hand in it, Calabast?"

Her grin turned devious as Lucky continued to purr in her grasp.

"The possibility can't be ruled out. Still, the MTA has been traditionally hands-off when it comes to the governing of far-flung star sectors. Not even the Rim Guardians treat

Komodo with importance due to its lack of development and value. Still, that doesn't preclude meddling from smaller players."

"I thought there were supposed to be rules against such overt meddling."

"The MTA sets its own rules." She pointed out. "Do you truly believe the MTA sticks to its own rules when they are their own arbiters?"

From what he knew of the MTA, almost certainly not! "I see."

"Besides, the affair concerning William Urbesh is the clearest example yet that the MTA or at least the Rim Guardians are not above picking sides. Without their intervention, the Urbesh Clan would have certainly collapsed in time!"

All of this was starting to confuse him. Ves wasn't interested in all of these machinations. He was just a mech designer! He just wanted to design and sell interesting mechs!

Calabast noticed his lack of interest. "Look, what I'm trying to say is that in these turbulent times, it's okay to give in to your paranoia. This time, I approve of your overabundance of caution. Few organizations can be trusted to have your best interests at heart. They are all looking out for themselves."

"Meow!"

Lucky rolled onto his back and started batting his paws at Calabast's palms as she tried to rub his belly!

Meanwhile, Ves let out a dismissive huff. "Tell me something new."

"Okay, since you can't seem to take a hint, let me be plainer. Don't trust anyone. Don't trust Gloriana. Don't trust the Ylvainans. Don't trust the Brighters. Don't trust the Kinners. Don't trust the Fridaymen. Don't trust the Hexers. Don't trust William Urbesh and ESPECIALLY do not put your trust in the Rim Guardians!"

"That..." Ves was momentarily speechless. "While I admit I'm a bit too paranoid sometimes, even that goes too far for me! How can I possibly live without trusting at least someone? Besides, what about you? Should I continue to put my faith in you when you are telling me to trust no one?"

"I'm not saying that." Calabast stared at him in the eyes. "Friendship and sentiment are too unreliable to be used as a basis for trust. Only mutual interests can serve as a basis for enduring trust and cooperation. The agreement we share between each other is something that continues to benefit both of us. As your fortunes have risen, so have mine. The same goes for your Larkinson Clan which you have expressly bound to you through a mix of familial sentiment and cold hard monetary interests."

"I understand that, but you're telling me to watch out to too many people. I can't possibly keep an eye on them all. That's what I have you for. Is there anyone I need to be wary of specifically?"

Calabast sighed and pressed her fingers against her forehead. "While I'm doing my best to look out for you, I'm not omnipotent. Otherwise, I wouldn't have failed you the last time. You can make my job so much easier if you don't trust others blindly and keep exercising caution. If you want me to tell you who to be concerned about the most, then you should definitely maintain a sober stance towards the Rim Guardians."

"This is the second time you've warned me against them. Do you know something about them? Why are you discouraging me from growing close to perhaps the only organization I'm friendly with that can bring us to the Red Ocean?"

"The Rim Guardians have a history of casting their net wide and associating with a large number of prominent locals. Do you think they are doing it for the good of the galactic rim?"

"It's kind of in their name.."

"Hahaha!" Calabast laughed. "The galactic rim is just a means to an end. Due to the opening of the Red Ocean, the Rim Guardians are beginning to pay a lot more attention to the new dwarf galaxy. From what little I can gather from their galactic movements, the Rim Guardians are planning to invest substantially in associates such as you. They want their best and brightest to become galactic pioneers in order to expand their presence in the new colonies. Their merits might come easier, but the price for that is agreeing to become their pawn!"

Though her words sounded ominous, Ves did not really consider it to be a big deal.

"You make it sound like the Rim Guardians will exploit me or take advantage of me. I don't think this will be the case. From what I've hear, my relationship with the Rim Guardians can be as equitable to the one I have with you. Both of us can gain something out of this cooperation. While the Rim Guardians are admittedly more powerful, they don't really care about individuals such as me. As long as I work within the constraints of their rules, They shouldn't treat me unfairly!"

The conversation quickly ended after that. Calabast decided not to provide Ves with other intelligence. Nothing acute was on her radar this time. All of the possible threats to Ves and his people were latent at this time, though that did not mean that nothing was going on. It was just that Calabast couldn't give Ves anything solid.

"One final word, Ves. That Hexer commission I told you about earlier is being reworked right now, but that does not mean it will stay open to you. The Temple of Hexism is merely looking for any boy who can design a mech. It doesn't necessarily have to settle for you. If you don't move in time, your opportunity might get snatched away."

Ves sneered at her. "I'm not rethinking my stance on the matter. I'm not going to play along with these dangerous or ridiculous schemes. If some other boy agrees to become a woman for the duration of the mission, then be my guess! I don't care about the Penitent Sisters! While I would still like to build up my relations with the Hegemony, it's not as important as my other goals!"

"Gloriana won't be pleased if she hears that. It was partially due to her efforts that she managed to secure this opening to you. Are you going to let her hard work go to waste?"

"Well, I'm not about to let her suffer a clinical death or undergo a gender transition!"

They decided to end their meeting there before the situation devolved into a shouting match.

Though both of them differed in opinion, Ves nonetheless came away from this conversation with a bit more preparedness against the Rim Guardians.

If Calabast turned out to be right, then his abundance of caution would definitely pay off!

Chapter 1846 Accelerated Expansion

His tense and vague meeting with Calabast was just a brief interruption of his current routine.

With nothing requiring his attention for the foreseeable time, Ves freely immersed himself on working on his mechs.

He felt a lot of relief at being able to finalize to the refit of the Shield of Samar. The mech started off as a airy eccentric third-class super-medium space knight. Now, its vastly-improved armor system paired with upgrades to a couple of key systems turned it into a veritable bastion in space!

The moment Merrill and the rest put the final pieces into place, they subjected the mech to an extensive amount of examinations. Nothing seemed amiss, which wasn't surprising considering how closely Ves and Gloriana paid attention to every detail.

Technically, the mech still needed to undergo a raft of testing. This wasn't strictly necessary, but highly recommended. A mech that experienced so many changes almost certainly experienced a lot of shifts in many areas.

While the Shield of Samar was still an Aurora Titan mech, its specs and configuration differed so much that Jannzi basically had to relearn how to pilot her personal mech!

As she was about to board the transport that had already been loaded with the upgraded Shield of Samar, Ves stopped by the Avatar base to see her off.

"You've certainly changed." He said after he patted her shoulder. "You're a far cry from the young woman who bewilderingly managed to become an expert candidate all those years ago. You've grown into a fine expert pilot in the making. The way you carry yourself and the air you radiate is already affecting the people around you like a real expert pilot!"

She smiled briefly at him. "I'm a far cry from an actual expert pilot like Venerable Brutus Wodin. He is a true example to look up to. I'm satisfied with my mech, but not myself."

"What's the problem?"

"I don't know. I feel as if there is something missing in me." She closed her eyes for a moment. "I'm luckier than most of my fellow mech pilots for becoming an expert candidate, but.. I never felt as if I deserve this honor. Being chosen is not the same as being worthy."

"Is that the reason for your lack of progress lately?"

"I'm not in a hurry to advance." She said. "In my current state, I would never allow myself to become an expert pilot. I have to be absolutely certain of who I am and what I am fighting for. Being a Larkinson is not enough."

"Are you confused?"

"Don't worry, Ves. Everything is fine. I've received lots of advice and words of wisdom from the other Larkinsons."

There was nothing Ves could do to ease her promotion. She needed to find her own way to break past this crucial point.

He didn't really understand what was necessary for expert candidates to advance to expert pilots. There was a world of difference between their respective force of wills. Whereas it was largely formless and powerless to expert candidates, they gained real power once they became expert pilots!

The differences between the two were both subtle and profound. Both of them possessed the same abilities but at vastly different strengths. There was something about expert pilots that made them special!

Journeyman like Ves relied on design seeds. Expert pilots like Ghanso and Brutus put most of their spiritual strength in their force of wills.

The evolution of force of will was therefore key to the advancement of mech pilots!

If Ves followed this line of reasoning, then willpower was likely the key to Jannzi's promotion. As long as she developed enough will, she would certainly prove herself worthy one day! He just hoped this day wouldn't come too far in the future.

Once Jannzi and the Shield of Samar flew off into orbit, Ves considered this side project to be done.

With how much care and effort he put into the upgrade project, Ves did not anticipate any major deviations. It was always easier to anticipate the performance of a variation of an existing mech.

Since he was already at the Avatar base, Ves decided that he might as well look around.

With Lucky exploring him and Nitaa and a handful of bodyguards trailing behind him, his arrival immediately caught the attention of the Avatars.

Ves had to wave them down several times in order to force them to resume their duties.

Overall, he was very happy with what he saw. The Avatars hadn't grown any weaker since their forced departure from Cloudy Curtain. If anything, his Avatars grew stronger!

There were several reasons why he thought so. For one, the cohesion between the Avatars increased. The circumstances that led to their departure did not cause them to lose heart. Instead, they became more emboldened! Siding with Ves meant agreeing to abandon the Bright Republic.

Though this was a harsh choice for many of his subordinates, the Avatars largely committed to their boss! They were willing to leave everything behind in order to take part in a risky but promising venture!

Second, the formation of the Larkinson Clan invigorated everyone related to the Larkinsons! This not only included the members of the clan, but also the people around them! Since the Avatars were completely dedicated to Ves, they also became affected by the significant shift in purpose!

He was gratified to see that every Avatar, particularly the mech pilots, became more and more invested in their new identities. Being an Avatar meant something now. It wasn't just a job anymore!

Part of the growth in the Avatars was reflected by the addition of new members. Ever since they settled down on Kesseling VIII, Commander Melkor cautiously started to recruit a select number of Ylvainans.

Due to their fanaticism and worship towards the Bright Martyr, thousands of mech pilots constantly applied to join the Avatars!

Only a few dozen Ylvainan mech pilots got their wish. Not only did Melkor and Ves want to make sure the Ylvainans were more committed to Ves rather than their faith or the Protectorate, they also wanted to maintain the high standards of the Avatars by hiring the best!

The only ones who eventually managed to pass through the gauntlet were those who successfully proved themselves.

To no one's surprise, the overwhelming majority of new recruits consisted of elite Kronon mech pilots!

Their strength and competences as well as their prior battle experience easily earned them the respect of the original members of the Avatars. Though cultural and religious differences still plagued their interactions to an extent, both groups didn't hesitate to find common ground!

Though the professionalism and discipline exuded by the elite Kronon mech pilots made them rather stiff to be around, they also fit in well for that reason. Their military bearing masked some of the intense religious beliefs they held. This reminded many veterans in the Avatars of the elite mech pilots of the Mech Corps!

Ves observed something else that brought him a lot of hope.

The days where the Avatars were forced to restrain their expansion was largely gone now. After several years of investment, training and indoctrination, a large and solid cadre had formed.

These vital and loyal Avatars served as the skeleton of a larger, greater mech force! According to Commander Melkor's plans, he would continue to recruit more Ylvainans until their numbers were bolstered by 200 new recruits!

Combined with the Larkinsons and other Brighters that had also signed up with the Avatars, Ves hoped to grow the Avatars into a mixed mech force comprising up to 500 mechs!

Seventy percent of them would consist of spaceborn mechs and mech pilots. The remainder revolved fully around landbound mechs.

Of course, this seventy-to-thirty split was not set in stone. In the future, when his mech pilots became more skilled and his mechs became more versatile, he hoped his mechs and mech pilots could operate in multiple environments.

In fact, many second-class spaceborn mechs in use in the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony also functioned as aerial mechs in a pinch. This was something that Ves definitely wanted the Avatars to work towards.

Though expanding the Avatars to five hundred mechs sounded a lot, it was even more exaggerated for the Living Sentinels!

His lesser mech force was slated to field double the amount of Avatars! At 1,000 mechs and mech pilots on its roster, the Living Sentinels would soon possess the strength to contend against military units!

In fact, both Ves and Commander Magdalena wanted to expand the Sentinels even further and turn it into the equivalent of a mech regiment. They cut those plans short when they came across several problems.

First, their funding would become rather strained. Procuring so many mechs and hiring so many mech pilots and support personnel wasn't cheap!

Second, procuring all of the carriers necessary to transport so many mechs simply couldn't be done during this awful climate! Ever since the Sand War broke out, the demand for starships had gone through the roof!

The Sentinels had long tried to order starships in the Bright Republic without any luck.

Fortunately, the Ylvaine Protectorate wasn't as impassive towards Ves and his organizations. Due to his popularity among the Ylvainans and the support provided by the Curins, a number of Ylvainan shipyards were willing to take his orders.

Of course, there were limits. He could only order light carriers which could be built quickly and cheaply as the Protectorate's economy was still in shambles. He also had to pay full market price for his ships, which basically meant they were inflated by at least three times compared to pre-war price levels!

All of this meant that in the short term, the strained supply of starships was the primary bottleneck that limited the expansion of his forces. They could only get away with expanding the Avatars to 500 mechs and the Sentinels to 1000 mechs because of the various accommodations made by the Ylvainans.

Ves tried not to impose too much on their generosity. Not only did he wish to avoid owing any favors to them, his forces also had a lot of difficulty in finding spacers to crew all of those ships!

"We're already leaning heavily on our host state as it is." He muttered. "Over half of our ships will primarily be crewed by Ylvainans!"

That made him feel rather uncomfortable. He had no problem when his organizations mainly consisted of Brighters. Yet the introduction of so many Ylvainans would inevitably make their faith take root in his expeditionary fleet!

He snorted. "Well, if I had a choice between hexism and the Ylvainan Faith, I would definitely choose the latter!"

As Ves continued to spot more signs of Ylvainan influence due to the influx of so many local mech pilots and support personnel, he began to feel more restless for change.

Staying in the Protectorate was supposed to be temporary. He just wanted to take refuge in the friendly state until he and his organizations were ready to move on. The moment they received all of their starships and put them in working order, Ves contemplated leaving for greener pastures.

He contemplated several possible destinations as he finished his casual tour. He waved at the mech pilots gathered around the four second-class practice mechs and nodded briefly at Venerable Brutus before he left the base.

"What do you think of the Avatars, Nitaa?" He asked his bodyguard as he settled into the shuttle with Lucky using his head as a nest.

"They're impressive." She said. "They are formidable, much more so than most Kinner mercenary corps. I believe they will do a fine job in protecting you against hostile mechs and other larger threats."

"I hear a 'but' coming."

She smiled grimly at him. "But the enemies you attract these days are often vastly more formidable. It doesn't matter if you invest in your own mech division. The Friday Coalition can easily smash your Avatars and Sentinels if it gets serious about defeating you. As we have learned at Cloudy Curtain, the power and authority of a state transcend personal strength!"

She was right. Being able to field 1,500 mechs might make Ves invincible against most pirate and mercenary outfits, but it was still incapable of deterring the actions of states or incredibly powerful organizations!

Chapter 1847 Constant Design

Though Ves had been delayed in starting his main design project, he did not consider it a waste. Working on the Aurora Titan, talking to Jannzi Larkinson and touring the Avatar base gave him a deeper understanding of his people.

Ever since Ves formally took responsibility for the Larkinson Clan, his mentality experienced a shift. He no longer purely looked out for himself. He also started to consider the impact of his decisions on his relatives and clan members.

Though he was also responsible for the LMC, he never considered it to be indispensable to him. Even if the company went bankrupt or got taken over by someone else, Ves would always be able to start anew.

This wasn't the case with the Larkinson Clan. For better or worse, he formed a bond with the Larkinson Mandate, causing him to become committed to his role as clan patriarch!

So long as he held the Larkinson Mandate, he had a duty to lead the clan in a wise and responsible fashion! This was the rule he set for the position of clan patriarch, and it was a rule that Ves could not afford to break!

Verbal or written promises meant little to Ves. He never abided by the rules once they no longer suited them, and he often got away with it because it was impossible to penalize his transgressions!

It was different now that he became spiritually connected to the Larkinson Mandate and the Golden Cat. The book and the ancestral spirit it nurtured watched over every Larkinson, including himself!

By design, the Larkinson Mandate was an heirloom that functioned as the spiritual heart of the clan. What this meant was that the book should essentially be able to keep the clan cohesive and united even if it grew into a massive power in the future!

The Mandate would gradually grow in power and become more potent as the clan grew in might and numbers. For now, the spiritual nature of the book remained weak.

This also meant that it was malleable!

If Ves exhibited crooked behavior in performing his duties as clan patriarch, the Larkinson Mandate would eventually reflect that!

Not only that, but the Golden Cat which always looked up to Ves would certainly take over some of his morality, which would be a disaster to the Larkinson Clan!

In order to make sure they developed into the pillars the clan could depend upon, Ves had to make right decisions for the clan. Ones that not only ensured its survival, but also its integrity!

Perhaps those who knew who Ves truly was like would state that he should be the last Larkinson to hold the seat of clan patriarch!

They were right. Ves was anything but an upstanding specimen of humanity. He didn't care, though. In this merciless multiverse where everyone was out for themselves, the Larkinsons needed someone to make the decisions they would never contemplate.

The Larkinson Mandate only governed decisions that directly related to the Larkinson Clan. As for other decisions, the book shouldn't pay much attention.

In any case, the Larkinson Mandate and the Golden Cat played vital roles in his next mech project.

The modular mech platform that Ves envisioned should embody the strengths and virtues of the Larkinson Clan!

This was very hard to do under ordinary circumstances, but the presence of the Golden Cat during the design process should remove much of the guesswork.

He affectionately tapped the Larkinson Mandate floating by his side. "I'm counting on you to make sure my mech does right by the Larkinsons."

The presence of the book in the design lab caused the entire chamber to be immersed with a formative glow.

The intrinsic Larkinson values of duty, family and courage had already started to shape up. The more the Golden Cat matured, the closer she developed the glow that would come to represent the clan!

No one could ignore the glow. Not when they were this close to the book. Ves had called Gloriana and his two design teams in order to make an important announcement.

"From this moment onwards, the Larkinson mech design project will officially start!" He spoke with pride.

Technically, all of the preparation work that took place beforehand should have been included as well, but nobody cared about these details.

The only thing that everyone knew was that Ves had finally decided to commit his full attention towards designing this complicated new mech!

Gloriana grinned and clapped. "I've been waiting for this! This will definitely be interesting!"

He threw her a brief glance. "Have you recovered already?"

"Not quite yet, but it won't be a problem for me to participate in the initial stages of the design process. I'll get back to normal in another week or two. I'll definitely be able to keep up with you by then!"

That was sufficient. He turned to his design teams.

"Alright. To many of you, participating in this project will be the first for you. Every mech designer adopts a different approach to mech design and project management. I'm someone who wants to be very thorough and methodical about our approach. This means that I plan to complete this project step by step according to a predetermined plan and vision. Is that clear?"

His question was mainly directed to the second design team. They all nodded in understanding.

"How big of a role will we play in this project?" Mayer Torto asked.

"Like most design teams, your primary responsibility is to follow our instructions and do the work we assign to you. Going by prior experiences, most of your tasks consist of taking our design choices and fleshing them out. Performing lots of tests and simulating the performance of the various iterations of our design is another major responsibility."

"Do we have any input on the design at all?"

The design team couldn't be blamed for asking such a question. Every mech designer wanted to see their efforts reflected in the end product!

Ves understood this, so he didn't outright say no even if he wanted to. "If you genuinely spot a flaw or come up with a good suggestion, feel free to bring them up to me. As long as they are good enough, I'll definitely include them into the design! Just take into account that Gloriana and I will probably come up with them first."

This answer satisfied his subordinate mech designers. Each of them had faith in their specialties!

"Any other questions?"

"Yes." Merrill raised her hand. "What exactly are we designing?"

This question was a lot harder to answer than Ves anticipated. While he had a lot of reasons in his mind, it was difficult to convey them to his audience. He had to pause and think on how to word his reply.

"The goal of this project is to design a mech that can adopt four different configurations for the Larkinson Clan. The major requirements of this mech are threefold. First, it has to be a modular mech platform with several spaceborn configurations. Second, it has to be a mech that embodies and represents the Larkinson Clan. Third, it has to be able to facilitate the promotion of third-class mech pilots to second-class mech pilots."

All of this sounded simple, but to combine all of these priorities in a single mech was a very considerable challenge!

The first and third priorities were easily understandable to the mech designers. While they were extremely challenging on a technical level, at least the mech designers could rely on their design and engineering expertise to solve most of the issues they encountered.

It was the second priority that caused a lot of confusion!

"What do you mean exactly when you say you want to design a mech that 'embodies' the Larkinsons?" Merrill asked in confusion.

Ves recalled that Merrill and most of the other mech designers in the second design team hadn't worked on a major design project with him before. Unlike the Tovar Design Team, they weren't versed in the principles and methods mandated by his design philosophy!

"I'll teach you some of the concepts that pertain to my specialty later." He promised. "Suffice to say, it's all about the mindset. The mentality you adopt and your understanding of the Larkinson Clan all affect the intangible qualities of our mech design."

As Ves briefly summarized some of the theories that he freely shared to his subordinates, he noticed a difference between his mech designers.

The Tovars were already familiar with his methods. While their Brighter skepticism prevented them from embracing his theories fully, they were nonetheless accepting due to all of the proof they witnessed.

Of the second design team, the Ylvainans were already similar. In fact, their expressions were so intense that they were acting as if Ves was speaking the gospel!

The only mech designers who didn't share in the obvious worship of the Ylvianans was the foreigners.

Both Merrill Truman and Mayer Torto viewed their Ylvainan colleagues with distaste. Both of them were clearly secularists and viewed every religion with distaste.

While this difference was a little concerning, Ves did not plan to transfer them to the first design team. The Ylvainans already became increasingly more involved in the Avatars, the Sentinels and the LMC.

Though Ves was gratified by their high spirits and enthusiasm, he did not wish to see their faith take over his organizations!

The Ylvainans needed to learn to get along with people who didn't share their beliefs. Segregating them into their own work groups was not the solution. That would only encourage the functions and cliques to stay apart from each other.

In the long-term evolution of his organizations, this would certainly lead to a potential schism!

"We can bring the second design team up to speed later. Let's get back to something more immediate." Gloriana suggested.

"Such as?"

"Tell us your ideas on the four configurations. How much do they deviate from each other? What aspects do you wish to emphasize for each of the different configurations?"

"Well, before I explain what I want the configurations to be good at, let me explain what they ought to share in common." Ves answered.

He activated a projection of their very rudimentary draft designs.

"If you take a good look at the drafts, what stands out to you?"

Gloriana smiled but refrained from answering. She had been a part of the drafting process, so she played a huge role in setting the initial design choices.

Oscar DiMartin was the oldest and most experienced mech designer. He participated in many different projects, so he quickly figured out the common thread.

"All four configurations are designed to be as similar to each other as possible! They're not very divergent from each other!"

"That's correct." Ves nodded. "Can someone else explain how that is reflected in our configurations?"

Gilbert Tovar, who was very sensitive towards differences in mass and layout, pointed towards the rifleman mech configuration.

"Ordinary rifleman mechs aren't as thick and sturdy as this draft configuration. It possesses an excess amount of armor that is strictly customary for this mech type. It's less mobile and able to evade damage, but it's a lot more resilient against damage as a result!"

"That's not always a good idea." Vela Tovar added. As a ranged mech specialist, she wasn't comfortable with this configuration! "One of the main reasons why rifleman mechs prefer to mitigate damage through evasion is because their rifles are always a lot more fragile than the frames themselves. If the mech becomes too easy to hit, then it's a lot more likely that an enemy will be able to snipe their primary weapons!"

"A slower ranged mech is also one that is less able to kite pursuing melee mechs. The instant a light skirmisher or lancer mech manages to close the distance, that ranged mech is a goner!"

All of these points were valid. Both Ves and Gloriana fully agreed with conventional wisdom.

Yet just because a certain decision turned into conventional wisdom did not mean it applied in every situation!

Chapter 1848 The One Mech

"There is a reason why the rifleman mech configuration is so bulky. It is the same reason why the space knight configuration is a bit skinny."

Ves tapped the projected interface until all of the common parts of the drafted configurations lit up in green.

"These are all of the common elements borne by the basic platform underneath the unique parts. Do you see how much they share in common?"

Every subordinate mech designer noticed how much stayed in common between the four designs. The proportion of constant elements was a lot higher than they expected!

Ves smiled. "Like any modular mech platform, the goal is to keep the differences between the configurations as small as possible. The more elements stay in common, the less time and effort required to swap configurations. This can be a crucial factor in battle. Equipping the design with a lower proportion of specific parts brings many advantages and makes the mech more efficient as a versatile battle platform."

"You lose out in efficiency in other ways, though." Gilbert Tovar noted. "The rifleman mech is arguably too slow, while the space knight is more of an offensive mech than a defensive mech."

His mass optimization focus caused him to be very sensitive towards the implication of his impactful design choice.

The decision to aim for a high degree of uniformity came at a very severe cost!

Both Ves and Gloriana recognized the implication of their decisions.

"You're correct." He said. "Modular mech platforms aren't widely used for this reason. Compared to specialized mech designs, there is a lack of focus in adaptable platforms that is difficult to leverage in reality. Many attempts to employ them in battle have failed because specialized mechs always outperform them on the battlefield. The lack of versatility of traditional mech units is mostly compensated by their division of roles and

good utilization of the characteristic strengths of their mech types. This is especially the case from a macro perspective."

It was generally a very bad idea to adopt modular mech platforms on a mech army-wide basis. In fact, it was already very problematic on the level of a mech division and mech regiment!

The luxury of being able to swap configurations and loadouts was not as big of an advantage as the theorists initially thought. Mech pilots were creatures of habit and mostly wanted to get better at one specific fighting style. It was a bit too much to ask them to become proficient in half-a-dozen different mech types!

For this reason, the modularity and adaptability aspect of the modular mech platform wasn't being used. Once these advantages ceased to be a factor, what did the mech units have left? They were stuck with an inferior, overpriced, inefficient and maintenance-heavy mech model!

As Gloriana outlined the general shortcomings of modular mech platforms, the subordinate mech designers grew more confused.

Miles Tovar raised his hand. "If the two of you are already aware of the many shortcomings of the mech platform, then why utilize it at all, especially for something as important as a mech intended to strengthen the Larkinson Clan?"

Ves smirked and crossed his arms. "Just because a solution is suboptimal in most cases doesn't mean it is a failed invention. There are applications for every possible mech, even the trashiest ones. Let's consider our situation. Aside from the requirements I've already mentioned, there are a few more conditions and constraints that have led me to the modular mech platform as the optimal solution for my needs."

He raised a finger.

"First is how much time it will take for us to satisfy our needs. The Larkinson Clan has a lot of mech pilots, and they are mostly specialized in a single major field while minoring in several other ones. While this allows them to pilot multiple types of mechs, they really won't do as well if they are piloting a mech they minored in. This means that selecting a single mech type such as a rifleman mech won't cover all of our mech pilots."

Gloriana added something else. "It's also a bad idea to adopt a single mech type throughout an entire unit unless it is part of a greater group that operates in unison."

"This means that I will definitely have to design multiple mechs in order to equip the vast majority of our mech pilots with my Larkinson mechs. This will take a lot of time which we don't necessarily have. I have other priorities as well, and I can't devote too much time on multiple mech designs that will only really service a small group of mech pilots."

Choosing to go for a modular mech platform conveniently allows me to settle with a single design, though with four internal variations."

"Do you really have to design a mech that is able to cover most of the Larkinson Clan's mech pilots?" Mayer Torto asked. "The Avatars and Sentinels already make use of a diverse selection decent mech models. They're perfectly serviceable."

"Only in the present." Ves said. "Our future needs are vastly different. Don't forget about the goal of trying to design a training platform. Depriving this mech from over half of our mech pilots won't accelerate their promotion to second-class mech pilots."

They understood now. To a mech designer, it was simply more efficient to design a single broad mech design than multiple specialized ones.

"Why the high proportion of uniformity, though?" Merrill Truman asked. The pirate designer had a much greater sense towards mech in actual use. "The configurations all look.. kind of weak. They look like mechs designed by committees. They are too balanced and not distinctive enough. The rifleman mech and space knight configurations are especially far from what we are used to seeing in those mech types."

Ves sighed. "It's true that there is a bit of laziness and compromise behind the decision to minimize the amount of uniqueness in the configurations. Going too far on the other end essentially negates the fundamental decision and will become no different from designing four separate mechs. I have set a hard deadline of 3 months for this project, and I intend to stick with it. With so little time for a design as complex as a modular mech platform, many sacrifices have to be made."

"What about the performance, then?"

"It's not as awful as it seems." He smiled again. He tapped the projection to highlight the armor coverage of the mechs. "All four configurations will use the same Breyer alloy as the principal material of their armor systems. Yes, that's right. The same second-class alloy that we have just used to turn the Shield of Samar into a mobile bunker will also be applied to this design!"

This came as a shock to all of them. Even Gloriana hadn't fully accepted that Ves settled on this choice.

"Where are we getting all of this Breyer alloy?"

"I have a supplier who promised me as much Breyer alloy at favorable prices. The only issue is that the supply of this material is not too much. This means that it's enough for us to reserve this material for internal use. I don't intend to squander this valuable alloy on other products."

"So you're going for the same effect as with the revision to the Shield of Samar. You want to rely on the superior quality of one of materials to elevate the quality of the Larkinson mech by force."

It sounded a bit bad, but that was essentially right. Ves felt as if he was getting further and further into the wasteful mindset of a second-class mech designer. Why wrack his head over coming up with a sophisticated implementation when he could just fork over more money and solve the problem in an instant?

Regardless of whether this pattern of behavior was detrimental to his development as a mech designer, the constraints on this project left him with very little choice.

He had to bow to reality and make many decisions he wasn't proud of in order to meet his goals.

"The armor system and structural supports won't be the only elements that are out of the norm of what is nominally a third-class mech design. I also intend to upgrade some other elements of the modular mech platform in order to make it viable against second-class mechs. Mind you, they won't be competitive against superior mechs, but at least the gap has narrowed to the point where my Larkinson mechs can pose a threat to them under favorable conditions."

A Larkinson mech would never be able to defeat a true second-class mech in single combat, but it was a different story if a squad of Larkinson mechs ganged up on a superior mech!

Considering his contentious relations with the Friday Coalition, Ves could not rule out the possibility that he would clash against their forces again. If a confrontation couldn't be avoided, then the last sight he wanted to see was hundreds of Avatars and Sentinels dropping like flies as they confronted a single mech company of Coalition mechs!

He still recalled the grossly uneven battles between his battle bots and the mercenary mechs of the Great Zona Republic! The sight of just four mech-like machines laying waste to hundreds of inferior mechs like they were cannon fodder still made an extremely strong impression in his mind!

Such a disparity between mechs was nice when Ves was on the side of the mechs that stomped the competition, but now he was on the opposite side!

Ves could never ask his friends, family and subordinates to recklessly endanger their mech and lives by throwing them against superior mechs with only a tiny chance of victory!

The Larkinson mech therefore needed to be powerful enough to threaten second-class mechs. As long as he could reduce the proportion required to defeat a superior mech

from a hundred inferior mechs to just ten inferior mechs, then the Larkinson Clan would truly have the power to protect itself in the star sector!

"To put it all into context, the ultimate goal is to develop a single design that can single-handedly uplift the Avatars, Sentinels and the Larkinson Clan."

Gloriana clapped and grinned impishly. "One mech to rule them all, one mech to find them, one mech to bring them all, and in darkness bind them, in the Red Ocean where the phasewater lies!"

Everyone looked at Gloriana in confusion, including her boyfriend!

"Uh, what?"

"Oh, it's nothing." She playfully stuck out her tongue. "The point is that we are attempting to accomplish much with just a single design. This is a very steep challenge, but as long as we succeed, we will definitely be able to go far, and it's all thanks to us, the designers of this one mech!"

Not everyone looked as confident as Gloriana.

"That's.. very ambitious."

"Is it even possible?"

"We can do it." Ves declared with conviction. "I have a track record of designing impactful mechs. Just as how the Transcendent Messenger and the Deliverer changed the fabric of the Ylvaine Protectorate, just as how the Desolate Soldier and its variants single-handedly saved the third line of defense in the Sand War, so will our one mech be able to elevate the Larkinson Clan to power!"

Both Ves and Gloriana were hopeful about the design despite its many technical challenges. Their sheer confidence and conviction inevitably infected their subordinates, causing them to look forward to what they could shape in the end!

As the design teams were preparing to perform their assignments, Ves briefly held the Larkinson Mandate in his hands and randomly flipped through its pages.

The Golden Cat appeared to know what was in store for her. Her intangible form gazed up at him with the cutest eyes he had ever seen from a spiritual product!

Nyaaaaa!

"Be patient. I'll get you your mech design soon enough! You'll be able to join your friends Qilanxo and the Solemn Guardian in watching over your mechs!"

He lovingly caressed the Golden Cat's head with a spiritual projection.

The Larkinson mech would definitely affect her development as an ancestral spirit. For the sake of the clan, Ves had to make sure the mech design met all of his goals!

Chapter 1849 Associate

"Hehehe... and into this design, he poured his cruelty, his malice, and his will to dominate all life."

Ves bonked Gloriana's head with his fist.

"Ouch! What was that for, Ves?!"

"Stop muttering vague literary nonsense and help me solve this slotting mechanism. You're much more suited to solve this problem than me, you know."

Gloriana slapped Ves' arm. "Why do you keep coming back to me with these kinds of issues? Can't you solve these problems yourself? You've grown lazy!"

"I'm not lazy. I'm efficient." He retorted. "Both of us specialize in different aspects of mech design. It makes sense to offload all of the complicated technical puzzles to you. On average, you are four times faster in solving these problems than me! Since we're so strapped for time, we'll have to distribute our workload as optimally as possible!"

"And that just happens to leave you with all of the easy work." She sneered at him. "Don't mistake me. I agree with your arrangement. It's just that you could do some heavy lifting as well, you know? The more you engage in these kinds of problems, the more you develop a structural sense for mechs. It's not good for your development if you continue to skip all of the challenges."

"I already have plenty on my plate, Gloriana. Not only am I supervising and integrating the efforts of our design teams, I'm also constantly working on the spiritual foundation of our mech design!"

The Larkinson mech was an extremely pivotal design that truly determined the future of the Larkinson Clan! With so much at stake, Ves wanted to invest as much strength into its design as possible!

He was not content with treating the design as another commission or business project. This was a passion project to him! Investing a disproportionate amount of effort and resources into the project was a given!

As soon as he stopped arguing with Gloriana and entered into a groove, his passion for this project heated up. He became more and more eager to flesh out their drafts and turn their vision into a reality!

Gloriana soon got caught up in his enthusiasm as well! As the days passed by, her prior mental exhaustion no longer made any impact at all, causing her to bring her full passion and emotions to bear!

Seeing her work so passionately and high spirited made him happy. She was just as invested in the design as him. Their shared passion also eased their cooperation and allowed them to accomplish some synergies.

That said, designing the mech was anything but easy. Not only did they have to design four unique configurations, they also had to design a base platform that had to be able to keep up with vastly different demands!

The rifleman mech configuration needed to be agile and precise while offering plenty of capacity for either energy cells and heatsinks or lots of ammunition.

The swordsman mech configuration needed to possess an adequate amount of defense and mobility. At the same time, they also had to improve its strength and make sure it could perform most of the possible moves that were common in mech swordsmanship.

The lancer mech configuration possessed some of the same demands of the swordsman mech, but had to excel in the charge. This meant that the mech ideally possessed more mass and frontal armor while at the same being able to pump a lot more power into its flight system in order to ensure the mech wouldn't take forever to deliver an overpowering blow. In addition, this configuration also had to be able to absorb an immense amount of shock!

Finally, the space knight configuration had to excel in defense. While this configuration did not need to be as mobile as the other configurations, it had to be able to withstand blows that could have felled five of the other configurations! This meant Ves and Gloriana not only had to find a good way to apply extra armor plating onto the space knight configuration, but also pair it up with a very hefty shield!

If Ves designed four self-contained mechs, then Ves could easily meet these requirements.

Yet because all of these requirements had to be applied to the same mech platform, everything became more complicated!

The interconnectedness of the four configurations with each other and the mech platform was very difficult to deal with. Ves had been forced to create an elaborate database with flow charts, objective trackers and timetables in order to keep organized.

Though involving the two design teams in the project increased his organizational burden, their assistance was essential in keeping the project on schedule. All of the smaller tasks and less important problems could be handed off to the Novices and Apprentices.

As long as someone senior to them checked over their work, the project progressed substantially faster than if Ves and Gloriana had to do everything themselves!

Though Ves thought about adding another design team more than once, he refrained from doing so. There were only Ylvainans available to him right now, and he did not wish to increase their representation within the LMC any further!

During the days when he designed his mech, he shoved as many distractions aside as possible. The LMC calmly chugged along under the lead of Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson while the Larkinson Clan leaned heavily on the Executive Council to manage its affairs.

Only the most urgent or important matters merited his personal attention.

One day, a message arrived that caused him to pause and leave the design lab right away!

Though the Larkinson mech was important, the message sent to his comm was even more crucial to his future!

The Rim Guardians finally called back!

"Please hold the fort for me. I need to answer this call as fast as possible."

Gloriana gave him a reassuring pat on his arm. "Your project is in good hands. I'll make sure that everything proceeds according to schedule."

"Thank you. I'll be back as soon as possible."

He picked up Lucky and the Larkinson Mandate and entered a small, enclosed office. He made sure to erect some privacy measures while leaving his communication line intact.

Only then did he answer the call.

A familiar uniformed female officer appeared into view. Lieutenant Rezzie Perct's projection studied Ves with a very curious expression.

"Congratulations, Mr. Larkinson. On behalf of the Rim Guardian Fraternity, we acknowledge that you have completed your mission. We have examined William Urbesh in great detail and have definitely confirmed that he has broken through to become an expert candidate. This.. is quite a surprise to us. Would you mind accounting for the methods you've employed?"

"I admit that we treated Mr. Urbesh a little rougher than was strictly safe." Ves carefully stated. "You know how he was before. He would have never been able to step foot on

the battlefield if we didn't smack some sense in him! Well, after smacking him enough times until we completely scrambled his mentality, we finally succeeded. Pushing mech pilots and throwing them straight into battle is a tried-and-true Larkinson method that has always succeeded in producing expert pilots for our family! While it was a gamble, I'm very glad it worked out this time. William can be proud of himself now that he has transcended his mortal limits!"

And mortal coil, for that matter. The 'William' that inhabited his body was very different from the William that originally cowered before his feet!

Lieutenant Ferct looked as if she could smell all of the nonsense he spewed! "Though the signs of long-term physical stress and heavy mental trauma are concerning, the Urbesh Clan's response to William's unexpected advancement was very jubilant. Their fall has finally been arrested with the hopes of a potential expert pilot taking the helm. This is extremely crucial for any group looking to prosper in Vicious Mountain's Garlen Empire. In this regard, we have no reason to quibble over the roughness of your treatment."

Ves relaxed. He knew it would be hard for him to explain what he had done should the Rim Guardians press further. Luckily, they didn't appear to be too interested in William's well-being. They didn't help William and the Urbesh Clan out of friendship. Instead, they were repaying a favor or advancing some kind of other scheme related to the Garlen Empire.

"Does this mean I'm an associate now?"

"You are." She smiled. "As I've said, welcome to the Rim Guardians. You not only have the right to join the ranks of our external associates, but we have also rewarded you with 50,000 MTA merits."

Fifty-thousand!

While that was a tiny figure compared to the 100 million MTA merits needed to redeem a second-class beyonder ticket, it was still a generous reward!

"Thank you, lieutenant. Those merits will come in very handy."

"Are you aiming for the Red Ocean?"

"I am."

"A lot of mech designers have made the same choice. Whether you can pass through the beyonder gate depends on your efforts. All I can say is good luck. You will need to work harder than any other mech designer and exceed our expectations over and over again if you want to earn merits required to become a galactic pioneer. A new future awaits at the Red Ocean. Grasp it before it is too late."

Ves had the sense that Lieutenant Ferct had memorized those last words because her superiors told her to. The MTA certainly wanted to take advantage of as many mech designers as possible! As the only supplier of MTA merits, they were definitely making a killing right now with all of the mech designers eager to earn more points!

Since Calabast warned him about the motives of the Rim Guardians, he remained wary of any traps.

At the very least, he wasn't as eager to meet the needs of this powerful organization as before. Everything had a price. Even the discount to the beyonder tickets likely involved all kinds of commitments that Ves wasn't sure he wanted to accept!

"So what do I have access to as an external associate?"

"Becoming one of our associates is a great privilege." The lieutenant emphasized. "However, do not think that makes you better than your peers in your star sector. An associate is nothing without the merits to exchange for goods and services. The more merits you possess, the more we can offer you. If we aren't able to provide you with what you need, then our many partners certainly will!"

That.. sounded a bit less than he expected. Even if he was an associate, without any merits, he wouldn't be able to take advantage of his access to the Rim Guardians!

In order to make this relationship pay off, Ves essentially had to keep earning more merits. This was probably exactly what the Rim Guardians wanted! Only through continuous milkings would they be able to extract the maximum amount of value from their serfs—, ahem, 'associates'."

The officer continued her spiel.

"This is an exciting time, Mr. Larkinson. With the opening of the Red Ocean, countless influences are vying to reach its vast, unclaimed riches. With an entire dwarf galaxy ripe for taking, we are also taking a heavy interest in how its bounty can enrich the galactic rim!"

Yeah right. The Rim Guardians would probably spend all of their gains on themselves, leaving the vast but sparse galactic rim to its own devices!

Of course, he didn't tell her that. "I am very eager to do my best to prove myself worthy to travel to the Red Ocean."

"Your chances are small, but not nonexistent. While the road is long, the Rim Guardians offer several means to make the journey easier. You'll be able to find out how soon enough. Even if you decide you wish to take root closer to home, we are still able to provide you with an abundant amount of help. I always enjoy it when enterprising young mech designers such as you get to become an associate."

"It is my pleasure to serve as the backbone of the Rim Guardians!" Ves slavishly lied.

"If you keep this mindset, it will be a breeze for you to earn our merits. We can be quite generous to those who are eager and capable enough to complete our challenges!"

Chapter 1850 Rim Exchange

The MTA lieutenant conjured up another projection. It displayed a small diagram that showed what he can do now that he gained surface access to their organization.

"For now, you have access to three different spheres within our fraternity. First, the business network can offer you many opportunities to earn money, find clients or expand your reach. You can also find new partners and suppliers who can offer you benefits that can't easily be matched by others."

This sounded very interesting to Ves. Gaining access to the business network was exactly what he was aiming for! Though it wouldn't be cheap, Ves would probably be able to benefit a lot as long as he had enough merits to secure what he needed!

"Is this where I can form a business contract that is guaranteed by the Rim Guardians?"

She nodded. "This is a popular service of ours. We offer many different forms of guarantees and protections. The best ones can be quite expensive in terms of merits. Most of the time, the basic ones are sufficient for your needs. Do take into account that if you wish to rely on the cross-sector services of RG Logistics, our trade company, you will need to pay an initial fee."

"How much?"

"The price to access the Yeina Star Cluster is 100,000 merits. If you wish to extend your business to the entire galactic rim, then a small price of just 10 million merits is sufficient! This is quite a bargain compared to the prices that other organizations charge! Mind you, these are all one-time fees. You only need to pay once in order to unlock access to our expansive business network!"

Ves almost wanted to puke when he heard the second figure. 10 million merits was enough for a third-rater to become the lowest form of galactic pioneer!

The price to access the Yeina Star Cluster was far more reasonable by comparison. This meant that Ves would not only be able to pay for the backing of the Rim Guardians in the Komodo Star Sector, but all the other star sectors in the cluster as well!

A star cluster typically consisted of two to twenty star clusters. Unlike star sectors, the grouping of star clusters were mainly formed for administrative, historical or arbitrary reasons.

In time, this artificial grouping became a natural one due to how the star cluster was run and how the star sectors always gravitated towards each other.

The Yeina Star Cluster was by all accounts an unimpressive one, just like almost every star cluster close to the frontier. It encompassed eight star sectors in total, and included Komodo, Vicious Mountain and Majestic Teal.

The most notable star sector of all was the Winged Serenade Star Sector. It served as the central star sector, which was sort of like a capital of the entire cluster. It not only hosted the cluster headquarters of the MTA, it also attracted much of the wealth and trade goods provided by the peripheral star sectors.

Everything was substantially better at Winged Serenade, from the states to the quality of their mechs.

"To be honest, some of our most valuable services and offerings are only available at our cluster headquarters in Winged Serenade." The lieutenant spoke. "It shouldn't matter too much to you at your current stage, but once you advance to Senior, I highly advise paying a visit."

"I will keep that in mind."

It would take several decades for him to advance to Senior. He would have definitely reached the Red Ocean by then! The lieutenant's advice was unnecessary for this reason.

"By the way, you can access many of our services through our virtual portal, the Rim Exchange. For most interactions, it is unnecessary for you to travel to Centerpoint or any of our other headquarter systems."

"I understand."

"Good. Let's proceed to our second amenity. The trade platform is exactly what it says. It's a platform where we facilitate trade and transactions between associates or our organizations. Mech designers looking for rare materials or collaborators with very specific specialties can find whatever they seek here. Those with useful and unique specialties such as you are always able to find great collaboration opportunities at this platform."

This sounded very interesting to Ves! He knew the potential of his own design philosophy and the ease in which he could collaborate with other mech designers. Even if he wasn't able to synergize with another collaborator, at the very least his specialty would always allow him to empower a mech beyond the means of technology!

"Will I be able to earn MTA merits from the trading platform?"

"No." Lieutenant Ferct shook her head. "Most offers and commissions posted on the trade platform are private in nature. You are transacting directly with other associates most of the time. The Rim Guardians won't be involved other than to witness or guarantee a contract when our services are called for. Be wary when you make a deal with some as associates won't hesitate to exploit you if you are inattentive."

Her words deflated his hopes. "I see."

"The trade platform does allow for ways to spend your merits, if you wish. We operate a virtual auction house that is tied to our physical auction houses. It holds period auctions that cater to various kinds of mech designers and people of means. Some of the auctions require you to bid with merits, while other auctions allow you to bid with MTA credits or other valuable goods."

This didn't sound as interesting to him. The goods and treasures that showed up in auctions mostly weren't relevant to him. Unless there was an opportunity to snap up one of the rare exotics needed to complete the System's annoyingly difficult Supply Missions, Ves did not intend to waste his time at auctions.

The lieutenant soon moved on the most important benefit of becoming an associate.

"Now, I'm sure it has dawned upon you that you can't avoid spending merits if you wish to make the most of your associate status. Our merit hall is the venue where you can find many opportunities to earn merits. MTA merits, to be clear. You can exchange your merits for many possible benefits from us or the MTA, though I advise you to stick with us. We offer substantially more merits for our missions, and we charge less for everything we offer."

Even if the Rim Guardians provided its associates with better deals, Ves had no illusion that they would recoup their investment in time.

The more an associate curried favor with the Rim Guardians, the less the associate would approach rival organizations.

Once an associate was knee-deep inside the swamp of the Rim Guardians, it was too late for them to leave!

This was what Ves suspected after Calabast passed on her warning. The difficulty was that Ves needed lots of MTA merits. The advantages provided by the Rim Guardians were far too important for him to ignore!

Therefore, even if the Rim Guardians presented him with a trap, Ves still intended to dive head-first into the swamp!

"What kind of missions do you offer?"

"Oh, there are many many missions, far more than our associates can ever complete. None of them are easy, though. The missions we issue to our associates are mostly errands that are too trivial or low priority to require our intervention. Many of them do not involve any states or local organizations. Instead, our missions are mostly related to the safety and stability of the galactic rim. The most dangerous and lucrative ones are often related to the deep frontier. This means that there is a high chance that you will clash against aliens over the course of your mission!"

Most mech designers would probably react with horror when they heard that they might have to travel to the deep frontier to complete a mission!

Ves was not like most mech designers. He barely exhibited any fear or surprise when he heard that the best missions required him to travel very far away from civilized space.

In fact, he was looking forward to accepting some of these missions! Not only would he be able to earn buckets of merits, he could also treat them as practice runs for his upcoming grand expedition.

When his grand expedition finally reached the Red Ocean after setting off, they would soon be roaming entirely new regions of space where humanity had only just arrived!

Basically, outside of the regions where the Big Two have already fortified, the overwhelming portion of the Red Ocean should be little different from the deep frontier!

Considering the abundance of threats and the lack of safe harbor, his expeditionary fleet needed to be ready to handle any possible emergency. Failing to prepare his grand expedition for every possible contingency was incredibly unwise!

"Is there any other way to earn a lot of merits?" He asked. "Ones that won't put me at great personal risk?"

Lieutenant Ferct smirked. "There are, but they are very demanding in other ways. Don't even think about them. They're mostly exclusive to Masters or very outstanding Seniors."

"Oh."

"That said, there are very special missions that have long been unmet. If they haven't expired, we have likely raised their rewards to greater heights. If you think you are confident and capable enough to complete them, then you should accept them. Mind you, many of their requirements are abnormal."

"Is there anything else that can earn me a lot of merits? Ones that doesn't demand something specific?"

"Well, the only other opportunity available to you are high priority missions. These are time-sensitive tasks that have been issued on short notice. Mind you, many associates are waiting night and day for such a mission! They are very lucrative but not as dangerous as deep missions. I advise you to visit the merit hall as soon as possible to scan all of the latent missions that have piled up. Who knows, one of them might be a good fit for your peculiar specialty and strengths."

As Lieutenant Ferct outlined the main types of missions offered by the merit hall, Ves took notes and formed a list.

[Standard mission: low rewards, low risk, low demands

Priority mission: medium rewards, medium risk, medium demands

Long mission: medium rewards, low risk, low demands

Deep mission: high rewards, very high risk, medium demands

High mission: high rewards, low risk, very high demands

Latent mission: high rewards, low risk, special demands]

Overall, Ves needed to navigate the list of missions carefully in order to earn as many merits as possible in the limited time he had available.

He already ruled out standard missions and long missions. They rewarded too little merits for the amount of time and effort needed to complete them. It would probably take a century for Ves to earn 100 million merits this way!

In order to leave the Milky Way Galaxy as soon as possible, Ves almost certainly planned to consider deep missions, priority missions and latent missions!

The most desirable mission to complete was the so-called latent mission which no one managed to complete for a very long time. Yet their requirements were so weird that most of them probably required skills and abilities that Ves didn't possess.

As for priority missions, Lieutenant Ferct already told him that they were only available for a very short time. Perhaps they might be up for a single second before a very fast associate snapped them up! There was no way Ves could compete against these desperate mech designers.

Therefore, deep missions sounded like his best hope. Ves felt he was very lucky that he was expanding and upgrading his mech forces. As long as he could form a fleet that was as strong as a mech regiment, then he would be able to withstand most threats!

If he equipped the majority of his mech pilots with his upcoming Larkinson mech, then his effective strength would almost certainly shoot up! As long as he managed to add some expert mechs and expert pilots to his lineup, then the strength of his fleet would definitely be a match for an entire mech division!